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ABSTRACT

Despite periodic efforts, traditional social studies teaching methods continue to be used in grades K-6. Research suggests that elementary students do not like or value social studies when these traditional methods are used to organize and teach its content. The goals of the social studies curriculum in grades K-6 are to transmit citizenship skills to children and to develop the skill areas of information processing, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, spatial awareness, social interaction, and time concepts. Through the use of picture and story books, teachers can utilize characters, plots, settings, themes, and relationships to introduce activities that assist in developing these skills. Fictional books contain information about people and relationships, emerging values, the effect of institutions on personal behavior, and lessons about people from various time periods and diverse cultural backgrounds. Children's fiction is also a source of useful information about historical events, current issues, global themes, and lifestyles. The most efficient form of delivery for this teaching method is for the teacher to read the books to the class and to plan which skills will be taught. (JHP)

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ERIC Digest No. 37

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CHILDREN'S FICTION AS A SOURCE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES SKILL-BUILDING

by Thomas M. McGowan

Educators wrestle twin dilemmas as they chart future directions for social studies instruction in the elementary grades. Social studies has been charged with promoting the skills of informed citizenship. Yet, evidence suggests that young people lack these tools after years of social studies instruction. Despite periodic reform efforts, traditional teaching methods and curricular patterns persist in grades K-6. Yet, research indicates that students do not like or value social studies primarily because of the ways in which its content is taught and organized.

Fortunately, a new teaching strategy shows promise for resolving these dilemmas. Activities generated from the content of children's fiction can effectively build a variety of skills related to social studies. These activities, moreover, engage children in learning experiences they find enjoyable and meaningful. This ERIC Digest (1) defines the connection of social studies to children's fiction, (2) argues for adopting this teaching strategy, and (3) examines factors a teacher should consider before implementing it.

What Is the Connection of Children's Fiction to Skill-Building Activities in the Social Studies? The strategy is a combination of two diverse elements. The first is the mission of elementary social studies teaching. Social studies in grades K-6 consists of a series of experiences designed to transmit citizenship skills to children. These competencies permit the effective citizen to make informed decisions regarding society's future welfare. They include a range of skill areas, such as information processing, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, spatial awareness, social interaction, and time concepts.

The second element is children's fiction. Though teachers refer to children's fiction as *trade books*, this term is misleading in the present context. Commonly, any print materials other than textbooks are labeled *trade books*. Several types of nonfiction, long-recognized as sources for social studies instruction (such as biographies), can be included in this general category. This teaching strategy, however, uses a type of trade book not typically viewed as a social studies resource. Children's fiction refers specifically to storybooks, picture books, and books of verse. Such works of the imagination as *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, *Gretchen's Grandma*, and *Sign of the Beaver* exemplify this narrower term.

These elements in tandem comprise this new teaching approach. Teachers use the characters, plot, settings, themes, and relationships in selected works of children's fiction to develop activities that promote citizenship skills. To build spatial skills, for example, children might chart the route and compute the distance traveled by the hero of *Orphan for Nebraska*.

To promote problem solving ability, young people might devise strategies to resolve the dilemmas faced by characters in *The Cay*. Picture books and storybooks introduce a range of social studies experiences for children.

A note of caution should be sounded here. Storybooks suggest activities and provide much of their content. Nowhere do they state procedures for teaching, however. An activity's structure depends on teacher creativity and invention. For the resourceful practitioner, the connection of children's fiction to social studies skills offers tremendous possibilities.

Why Should Teachers Use Children's Fiction to Build Social Studies Skills? Admittedly, using the content of children's fiction to convey social studies skills to elementary children seems a marriage of incompatible partners. Picture books seem whimsical; fanciful creatures are portrayed without purpose or lasting meaning. Citizenship training, by contrast, seems academic and serious with significant implications for individual growth and the common good.

After carefully considering this match, though, pairing social studies skill-building and children's fiction makes great sense. Children build citizenship skills in order to function productively in American society. To contribute to the commonweal, young people learn lessons about the ways people live. Students acquire skills to make effective social decisions and the willingness to participate in the decision-making process.

Opportunities for children to model these citizenship qualities fill the pages of children's fiction. Storybooks contain knowledge about people and relationships. Their characters deal with emerging values, demonstrate the effect of institutions on individual behavior, and relate with others in many situations. Children's fiction, moreover, offers lessons about people from various time periods and diverse cultural backgrounds.

Finally, storybooks provide examples of citizenship skills in practice. Characters communicate with others, determine cause and effect, locate places on maps, process information, and think reflectively. The characters of children's fiction are concerned about and involved in their society. They confront choices every citizen must make, and circumstances force them to make decisions that influence the welfare of others. Far from a mismatch, citizenship skill-building and children's fiction seem a natural combination. Storybooks are an ideal source for activities that convey the tools of citizenship to children.

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What Factors Should A Social Studies Teacher Consider When Using Children's Fiction? Believing that children's fiction can contribute activities that build citizenship skills is a first step in making this teaching strategy an integral part of an elementary social studies program. Yet, conviction alone will not ensure successful implementation. Three factors must be seriously considered before this approach yields productive results.

Selecting quality children's fiction with citizenship implications is the most important of these factors for two reasons. Quality sources avoid the stereotyping and misinformation that limit effective citizenship. Quality books, moreover, confront issues and values essential for meaningful citizenship preparation.

A quality work of children's fiction satisfies several criteria. First, the book is developmentally appropriate. Its prose can be understood by its intended audience. The author chooses settings, plot situations, and themes that are relatively familiar to young readers. Second, an appropriate story or picture book has lasting literary value. It is both meaningful and enjoyable to read. The author writes and illustrates with particular attention to character development, dialogue, plot, imagery, and message. Third, suitable children's fiction presents the reader with valid information. The book portrays a historical period with reasonable accuracy. The story depicts a way of life or culture in "true-to-life" fashion. The author, moreover, shows no damaging bias. Finally, a quality children's book offers the reader a message of lasting value. The author examines an issue worthy of the reader's attention. The story involves values and attitudes that a citizen must eventually assimilate.

Fortunately, many resources help teachers in the search for quality fiction related to social studies for elementary students. The National Council for the Social Studies, for example, annually provides an annotated bibliography of "Notable Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies" in the April issue of *Social Education*. Winners and finalists of national book awards (such as the Newbery and Caldecott Medals) are also strong candidates for promoting social studies skills. The International Reading Association publishes "Children's Choices" in the *The Reading Teacher*'s October issue. This list offers not only quality fiction, but books that children prefer to read. Finally, state and regional organizations prepare lists of exemplary children's ficton that can prove useful in the book selection process. Examples of these resources include the *Golden Sower* (Nebraska), *Young Hoosier* (Indiana), and the *Mark Twain* (Missouri) awards.

A second factor in the successful use of this teaching strategy is the process of delivering a book's content to children. Once the teachers select a quality work of fiction, they must determine the best way to "tell" the story to students. A book can be read silently by individual students or read cooperatively by small groups of children. The most efficient delivery method, however, is for the teacher to read the book aloud to the entire class. Before a read-aloud session, the teacher should consider questions of mechanics (pacing, inflection, voice clarity, etc.) and timing (when and where is the story best read). The teacher should also decide whether supporting media or other reading aids are appropriate. Jim Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook* offers valuable guidance in determining the most effective delivery method.

Teachers must address a final factor to implement this strategy successfully. They must consider what social studies skills and content will be taught using children's fiction. As mentioned previously, teachers must generate skill-building activities without direction from the books. The creative teacher realizes that many citizenship skills can be reinforced using activities derived from story and picture books. To promote spatial skills, a teacher might have students map the small town in which a story occurred. Students could hone their communications skills by comparing slang used in a story with comparable colloquialisms from their own speech. Storybooks suggest many small group tasks that build students' ability to interact constructively. To build information processing skills, students could research antiquated items described in a work of historical fiction. To boost critical thinking, students might draw inferences regarding a character's motivation or predict what a particular character might do in a hypothetical situation. Students could boost time concept skills by finding cause-effect relationships among a story's major events.

Children's fiction also serves as a source of useful information for a number of social studies curricular areas. Historical fiction captures an era and conveys its essence to students as no textbook can. Story and picture books deal sensitively with many issues covered in certain content areas (racism, substance abuse, the single-parent family, obeying the law, consumerism, etc.). Many works of children's fiction explore global themes and examine lifestyles around the world. Storybooks whose themes parallel the "Expanding Environments" approach to curriculum organizations can be found in abundance (e.g. books about "self," books about "family," books about life in the "neighborhood," books about "our community," etc.).

In conclusion, the resourceful teacher generates activities that promote social studies skills from story and picture books. The books' content, moreover, reinforces a variety of social studies curricular areas. Linking children's fiction and skill-building activities offers great potential for effective social studies instruction.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a bibliography of resources, including references for the preparation of this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in *CIJE* (*Current Index to Journals in Education*) which is available in libraries containing ERIC collections. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries, using the bibliographic information provided below.

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